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It's a natural

Meeting the challenge of a bush setting **12**

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FACT FILE

THE BRIEF

To create a home that makes a statement while also working with the natural beauty of the site

THE OWNER

Drew Muirhead

THE ARCHITECT

Richard Cole



Nature knows best

Inspired by its surrounds, this sandstone house melts into the landscape, writes **Robyn Willis**

The first thing you notice about this site is its extraordinary setting. Positioned in the small community of Cottage Point and surrounded by Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park on Sydney's Northern Beaches, the house draws visitors to the water from the moment you step off the street and through the door.

The plan was to create a spacious family home that would deliver light and space without trying to compete with the surrounding environment.

A steep 1100sq m site with nothing more than a boatshed-style cottage at the water's edge when owner Drew Muirhead arrived, it presented a set of challenges that would

need to be overcome if it were to become the kind of house he hoped for.

Apart from the obvious constraints of building on an angle, it had a less-than-ideal north-facing street front and was firmly positioned in the middle of a fire zone.

In addition, its isolated location meant it needed to have its own water-harvesting system if it were to be sustainable.

Drew promptly turned to the services of local architect Richard Cole for advice.

Sitting comfortably

Richard proposed a two-storey house with the lower level set into an existing "bench" or terrace that had already been partially

excavated. This would provide four compact bedrooms and a spacious bathroom, all with direct views over the water, as well as an enclosed living area with its own large sliding doors offering access down the block to the jetty.

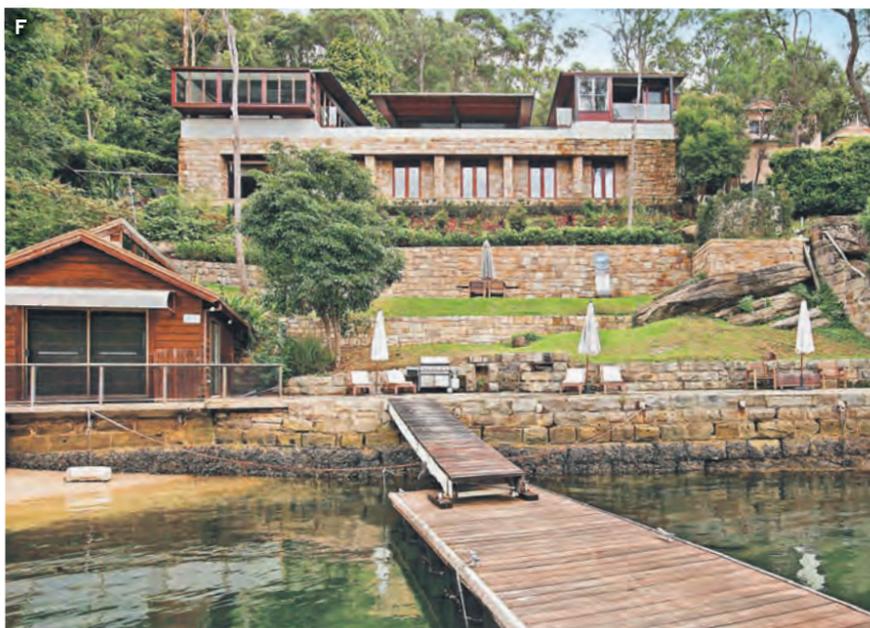
Above, an H-shaped building would offer a dining and living space by the front door and the main bedroom suite at the far end, with a long, wide corridor providing ample room for the kitchen.

A grassed area to the rear would provide some soft landscaping, while the kitchen would overlook a timber deck leading on to an infinity pool. Richard says the idea behind the design was to

PHOTOS: JOHNFIADIS



A Angled windows pull in the maximum light
B Architect Richard Cole
C Green tiles blend the pool water with its Pittwater outlook
D The living area
E Light pours into the dining area
F All the bedrooms have direct access to the view
G The rumpus room
H The kitchen is not short on space



very quietly mirror the natural landscape. "I've always loved that feeling, coming out of the bush on to a rock escarpment and then you get that uninterrupted vista from the rock ledge," he says.

"There are rock pools and trees around you but you have that vantage point."

But with council insisting the house have a 15m setback from the water and the need for extra fire protection from the vulnerable street front, achieving a light-filled rock ledge required more than a little thought.

Let there be light

To pull the northern light as far into the house as possible, Richard opted to lift the roofline from the street. This created space for a bank of windows which are a little reminiscent of a pop-up caravan awning – a nice touch for a place that is still a destination for holiday makers.

Internally, separating walls are more like partitions ensuring that as you enter from the high side of the street, the water is

already catching your eye and the natural light can move freely through the house.

Because the pool is enclosed by the house on three sides, the kitchen and living room windows had to be fixed high enough to comply with regulations for pool safety.

The third side was a solid wall concealing the ensuite from the main bedroom.

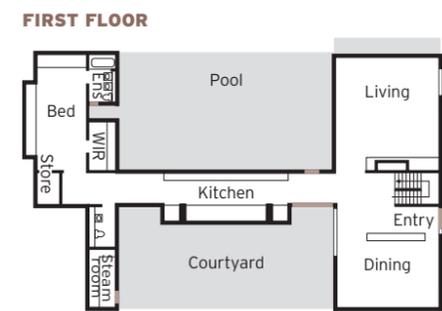
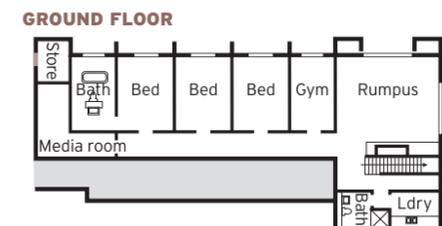
Given the downstairs bedrooms are positioned under the pool, Richard decided to design circular portholes in the ceilings to capture light passing through the water.

With his experience in the industry, Drew was keen to manage the 13-month process himself, calling on Richard for advice when necessary.

Material world

Richard usually specifies Australian timbers, however he says Drew wanted Indonesian-grown merbau. Although widely used in Australia, because of its beauty, strength and affordability, it can be difficult to order it from a sustainable source. »

"I've always loved that feeling, coming out of the bush on to a rock escarpment"



BUILDER'S ADVICE

- » Choose an architect familiar with your area's requirements. Someone with experience in designing for bushfire zones will ensure a smoother approval process.
- » Take the time to get the materials right. Beautiful timbers and the right colour tiles help this house sit well in its setting.
- » Think of everyone living in the house when designing.



A Merbau rafters contrast with plywood lining boards **B** The first-floor ensuite **C** The central courtyard **D** One of the two ground-floor bathrooms

» “We were limited in the selection of species we could use, because the house is in a bushfire-prone area and you can only use certain fire-resistant species,” Richard says. “We talked to different suppliers to try to find one that is sustainably managed and eventually found a plantation-grown source.”

The liberal use of merbau has been balanced with details such as tapered steel beams, stainless-steel kitchen benchtops and pool tiles just the right shade of green to blend in with the water beyond.

Merbau rafters contrast with plywood lining boards to create a lightweight effect in the roof while louvred windows create cross ventilation with a look reminiscent of traditional holiday homes.

A series of sandstone walls inside and out and a fireplace kept a team of stonemasons busy for almost a year.

Richard says there is no substitute for the solidity of natural materials.

“There are a lot of stick-on veneers but they are not quite the same as real stone,”

he says. “The interesting thing is that as other materials have become more expensive, stone work has become less expensive by comparison.”

Apart from a partial collapse in the early stages of construction after a deluge, the building process ran relatively smoothly.

Drew chose to use a slightly different building method, Insulated Concrete Forms from Zego. These large foam blocks form the framework for pouring concrete.

In addition to being a lightweight material to move around the site, Richard says they have excellent insulation qualities.

“You can carry big loads and one person can move them, which is an advantage on a steep site like this,” he says. ■

willisr@dailytelegraph.com.au

MORE INFORMATION
Richard Cole Architecture 9918 3843, richardcolearchitecture.com.au
Zego 1300 139 346, zego.com.au

